

# **Information Seeking Behavior of Israeli Health Consumers who use Internet for Health Information Search / Magidov, Valerie**

## **Abstract:**

The research at hand closely examines main properties of health related information usage on the Internet, changes in doctor- patient interaction in the new era, and the benefits for the health consumers in using the Internet. There is high percentage rate of Internet users in Israel, about 72% of the general population over 13 years old ( according to TIM<sup>tm</sup> Teleseker survey, 2008). With the Internet breakthrough, the number of Israelis seeking for medical information in order to broaden the understanding of their state of health rose dramatically. Searching the Internet for health information exists across all sectors of the population in Israel. Many different aspects of health care system are experiencing a major revolution, and this technological revolution has many implications. The Internet gives it's surfers an unlimited amount of information about health and medicine:

- Information and services in various areas of health and medicine can be found at websites, medical portals, encyclopedias and search engines.
- Forums managed by medical specialists and social support groups.
- E-commerce of food, vitamins, medicines and more.

It is clear that there are many advantages of using the Internet as a channel for health information. The main reason that causes people to use the Internet for health information searches is "saving time". In addition, people turn to the Internet because there, they can find the latest information, safeguard their anonymity, get another doctor's opinion, and ultimately – save on cost. Enjoying the search plays an important role too. Thus, whoever finds more pleasure in searching the Internet is more satisfied, gets more benefits, relies on the online information network and the information, is looking for more information, and is more influenced by it. This way fun becomes an advantage of the Internet over other channels of information.

As Israeli consumers seek more health information on diseases and treatment of all other subjects, information becomes a power that fills emotional, psychological and physiological needs. However, consumers also seek information about managing a

healthy lifestyle, meditations and hospitals, information about doctors, updates, innovations and alternative treatments. They also seek information on the hospitals and social and emotional support options, although at a lower rate.

With the variety of channels of health information that are available now to the public, staying up-to-date is considered a must for the health-care consumer. While doctors are still the most common and preferred channel of information for most of the consumers, consumers are searching for information via other channels, especially the Internet, which is the most inviting and the most accessible channel. In addition to health consumers turning the most to physicians and to the Internet when they need health information, they are also getting the most information from both of these channels.

Generally, most of the tested users surf the Internet at home or at work in order to search for information, use e-mail and participate in forums. It seems that they clearly appreciate their level of experience with relation to the Internet and computers. They report that they do not find it difficult to find health information they need, to a large extent, enjoy the process of search and see themselves as "experienced" on the Internet. Furthermore, evaluating correlations indicates that when the level of self-esteem in person's ability to find health information on the Internet is higher and level of difficulty lower, the amount of information received, the search frequency, trust in the Internet and in its reliability and the degree of influence of the information is higher.

In health, as in many other topics, most consumers use the search engine "Google" while looking for information online. They usually look for information about health and medicine both in Hebrew and in English.

Information about health and medicine that the consumers have been exposed to via the Internet may be misleading and not credible, whether because of lack of professionalism of the advertiser, or due to marketing interests, or any other reason. Health consumers without medical education might have hard time identifying the degree of reliability, the source of information and degree of accuracy and degree to which the information is updated. Internet consumers have to be careful and aware of information reliability in general and regarding health data in particular. This research indicates that the Internet is perceived by consumers as reliable enough, a fact that is

not necessarily true. Correlation evaluation demonstrates that as the trust in internet and in its reliability is higher, the frequency of its usage, impact on health decisions and desire to recommend to others on the Internet as a channel for health information is higher as well. It seems that more in-depth familiarity with the criteria for reliable, quality health information will make it easier for Internet users and will assist them to exercise caution in evaluating the sources of health information they are exposed to. Information on health and medicine on the Internet can be a great benefit that could strengthen the status of health consumers by letting them to be involved in decision making when it comes to their health. The immediate benefit for tested group is first and foremost an improved communication between doctors and patients. In addition, it is manifest in providing an option for consumers looking for another opinion or information from sources other than the doctor who is their primary care-giver. The information on the Internet also helps consumers to better understand their own situation or the status of their family members. Internet use also affects decisions of online consumers concerning the health of their family members, contributing to their health and allowing them to remain updated on issues that interest them. Another finding is that with an increase in the level of satisfaction and usefulness of information found on the Internet, the impact on the health decisions of consumers, faith in reliability of information on the Internet, as well as the degree of use has increased too. At the same time, it cannot be ignored that increased exposure to medical information may result in confusion and unnecessary stress. Most of the subjects evaluated are looking for information on the Internet both before and after a visit to the doctor. Consumers search the Internet before the doctor's visit in order to prepare for a meeting and to be on the same page as the doctor, and after the visit to complete and to verify the information given by the physician. In addition, consumers want to be served by physicians who are able to guide them to high-quality, reliable information sources. As it is not always possible for the consumer to make an intelligible use of the Internet, the doctor must take on the role of the guide to refer customers to reliable and high quality information sources on the Internet. Furthermore, doctors should encourage independent search for health information because it can contribute significantly in several aspects. Consequently, it was found that if the doctors response to an independent search for health information online is a

positive one, the benefit of such information is higher and patients will tend to search for information more frequently, their own decisions about their health will be affected more by this information and they will recommend others to use Internet as a channel for health information. It seems that the real revolution that the Internet has created is a change in interaction between doctors and their patients; there are some who will call it a major revolution in regard to the doctor-patient communication patterns. Consumers express great satisfaction as well as great benefit from availability of health information that has a positive impact on the perception of the Internet as a channel of health information. Another finding is that with the perception of the Internet as having many advantages it is perceived as having more benefits.

Regarding correlations between personal characteristics, such as gender, age, income, education and the state of health and various aspects of the research, some differences were found. The most significant finding is that women are looking more for health information, for information on preventive medicine and for opinions of other doctors, and mothers tend to seek more information for their children. These findings suggest that women take on themselves the family health matters and have more awareness for maintenance of health and importance of preventive medicine.

All these findings indicate that consumers do not see the Web site information as a replacement for the treatment or for the doctor's visit. Tested individuals distinguish between the tools and information that can be provided by the Internet, and proper medical supervision that is not provided by the Internet. However the most significant benefit of the information revolution on the Internet is the changes that occur in doctor- patient relationship. Overall, the findings indicate that the "sick patient" of the past has become a "health consumer" searching for health information, validating it, updating, and expecting doctors to guide and refer to additional information sources. All of this highlights that, despite different motives, the search patterns and the level of activity that comes from personal factors, people today want to perform as modern health consumers, showing a greater interest and awareness in promoting their health and taking responsibility for it.

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